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TEXT AND IMAGES
BY WINFIELD ROSS

SERIAL RESTORER JOSEPH MILLER BOUGHT THREE OLD SHARED-WALL TOWNHOUSES
SLATED TO BECOME A PARKING LOT IN PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA, AND RETURNED THEM
TO THE SINGLE PALLADIAN MASTERPIECE THEY ONCE WERE.

JOSEPH MILLER has a simple, stock answer to why he continues to make museum-quality home restorations in Petersburg, Virginia.

"I was born here," he said. Petersburg is his town. He's lived there all his life—with time off only for education (undergraduate work at William and Mary, art study in Florence, the town of the Medici and daVinci), and a 20th-Century Grand Tour that embraced England, Scotland, Wales, Austria, Italy, and France.

"It's what well-rounded 18th-Century people were supposed to do," he noted.

As a lifetime resident, Joseph has seen Petersburg evolve over the decades as it has tried to cope with a changing world. Early in its history—Petersburg traces its beginnings to founding in 1635 and a 1748 official charter—it was a hub. Built on the fall line at the head of navigation to the Appomattox River, it rivaled Richmond and became Virginia's second-largest city and a major rail center, only to be punched on the chin by the Civil War. The Siege of Petersburg lasted 292 days, opened the way to Richmond for Union troops, and led directly to Confederate surrender. The city rebuilt itself as an industrial center in the early 20th Century only to see its major industries—luggage and optics—move away.

Despite the area's often depressed economy, Joseph remains upbeat about Petersburg. As his lifelong tenancy attests, he finds it a great place to live, still close to the state capital but with a rural feel thanks to its rich cultural heritage. His biggest concern is that he sees neglect of the city's historic heritage. Already in January 2019 the city lost its 1811 Nash Building, torn down after a partial collapse.

Joseph is the kind of guy who likes to take matters in his own hands. That's why, when no one else would do it, he spent ten years restoring his 1792

Joseph Miller decorates his 1792 home with a mixture of antiques and reproductions in the French style of the late 1700s. In the center hall, wallpaper based on the 1794 French pattern *Les Sylphides*, produced by Jean-Baptiste Réveillon, covers the walls above paneled wainscoting. Réveillon is credited for his innovative techniques, including design and chemical adhesion, and was one of the leading paperists to Marie Antoinette. Window swags and shield-back chair seats, based on originals from Norfolk, Virginia, accent the wallpaper's vibrant green. The console tables are reproductions of Charleston originals. A reproduction inlaid center table stands beneath a vintage-style lantern. The staircase had to be recreated in its original location. The stair treads are made from recycled wood and the balusters are based on those at Toddsbury Plantation in Gloucester, Virginia. Joseph and his father remade all of the missing moldings. The woodwork is painted a custom-mixed stone color. The original pine flooring was sanded and waxed to preserve the natural wood. The pillared doorway with fanlight opens into the drawing room.

For the dining room, Joseph chose blue similar to what he had seen at Monticello for the wall color. He and his father built the gilded window cornice boards based on a Hepplewhite pattern. Ruth Hubbard designed and stitched the swags and jabots here and in the entry hall and drawing room. The inlaid Hepplewhite reproduction table with banquet ends is surrounded by reproduction chairs with embroidered white leather seats. Reproduction Chippendale chairs stand against the left wall. Hanging above the original mantel is a reproduction of a portrait titled *Miss Bannister*. Joseph restored the reproduction 19th-Century portrait of a British officer above the doorway. The chandelier is a replica of a French Empire example.

An elaborately carved solid walnut table by Baker Furniture copies one from a British estate. A three-piece gilded wall bracket in the French rococo style is a reproduction of a single piece at Castletown House, the County Kildare estate built for William Conolly, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons. Completed c. 1729, it was the first Palladian house built in Ireland. The bracket holds small lidded jars and busts of Handel and Nero. The molding atop the wainscoting is also copied from Castletown. In the foreground, the dining table displays Italian figures of the Four Seasons and 19th-Century candlesticks.

ABOVE LEFT A 1790s London-made tall-case clock stands in a niche next to the dining room fireplace, flanked by a gilded torchère at left and a Charleston-style muffin stand at right. Joseph bought the reproduction landscape at an auction of props from the AMC television series "Turn: Washington's Spies," about the Revolutionary War Culpepper Ring, which aired from 2014-17. ABOVE RIGHT The sideboard is a modern reproduction, set with reproduction 18th-Century creamware beneath an early-1900s mirror with gilt that Joseph repaired. The wall pockets with faces are reproductions of Winterthur Museum pieces. The door leads down to the English basement.

home, Strawberry Hill, with the help of his parents. One of the oldest remaining homes in the city, it stands as a towering white manse on the edge of the business district. Its classic, formal architecture is called Federal by some, but it has roots that go back to the Italian master.

Named after Horace Walpole's eponymous Gothic manor and estate in Twickenham, England (a neo-castle which it does not resemble), Strawberry Hill echoes the plan of Twickenham's nearby Marble Hill House, the undoubted Palladian manor that is regarded as the pattern for many 19th-Century English estates. Strawberry Hill in Petersburg is a more modest interpretation of the motif, two-stories rather than three, white clapboard rather than marble.

Long ago it lost its regal look, a victim of poor estate planning, a divi-

Joseph spent a decade restoring the three disparate sections of Strawberry Hill to its original Palladian splendor, earning a National Preservation Award in 1994. The main entryway, iron railings, and marble steps, quarried in Philadelphia, are original to the house. Joseph was surprised these features survived the structure's division among owners and the subsequent modernizations.

sion among siblings, and three different takes on modernization and expansion. Strawberry Hill lost direction, its integrity, and nearly its soul. Without Joseph's ten-year rescue, a neighbor would have razed it to add parking spaces. Instead, after ten years of painstaking restoration, the National Trust for Historic Preservation gave it its National Preservation Award for 1994.

HOUSE HISTORY

"William Barksdale built the house," noted Joseph. "He was on the town council, a tobacco merchant who had a warehouse on Market Street and a tenant house there."

Indeed, Barksdale was a prominent man in the community, but one who disappeared from the town records.
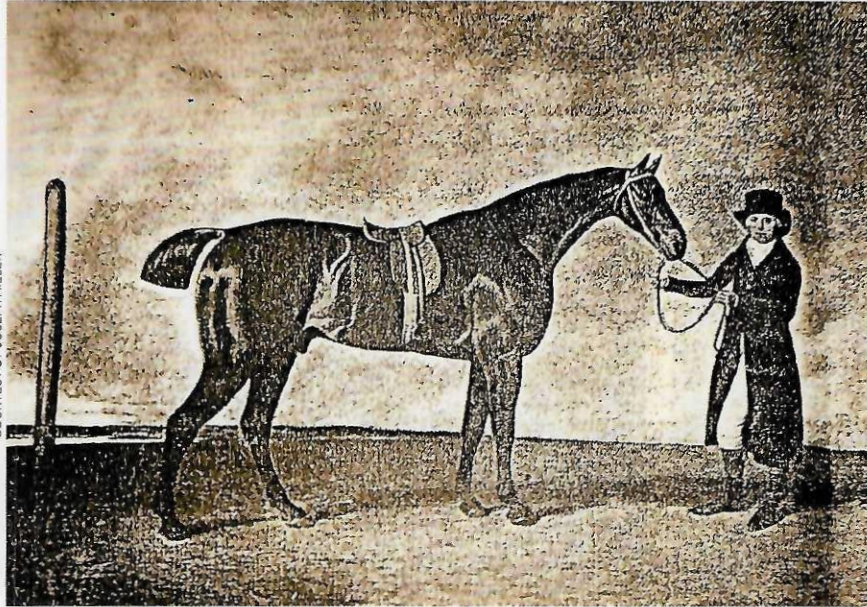
"His bride died here in this house in childbirth," explained Joseph. "A descendant wrote me a letter of what happened. He took his infant son and went to England." When the boy had grown, his father arranged a marriage for him in America, but the elder Barksdale fell ill and died during the voyage.

William Haxall bought the house in 1800, and he expanded it to

COURTESY OF JOSEPH MILLER

LEFT A copy of a contemporary painting depicts a British horse groom with William Haxall's champion Thoroughbred, Sir Harry, winner of the 1798 Epsom Derby.

BELOW Joseph whitewashed the stone walls in the English basement and furnished it with a 19th-Century English oak drop-leaf table and reproduction Chippendale chairs. The table is set with Canton china and Colonial Williamsburg flatware. He bought the 19th-Century-style sideboard at an auction. The original fireplace and bake oven were uncovered and re-pointed during the restoration.

its current form, raising what originally were one-storey wings to two. Haxall also added color to the history of the house. He was founder of the largest flour mill in Virginia (until it burned during the Civil War) and was a horse racing advocate.

"In 1804 he bought the winner of the 1798 Epsom Derby in England, Sir Harry," said Joseph. The cost of the horse and shipping to Petersburg totaled 650 guineas (equal to about $7,000 then), the highest price paid (until then) for a racehorse. But the investment paid off, noted Joseph. "Secretariat's blood line goes back to that horse."

After Haxall, the home went through several owners until James McIlwaine bought it for himself, his wife, and three children. "He died suddenly in 1857 without a will," explained Joseph. "His minor children inherited the property, which was maintained by an uncle as trustee until they were old
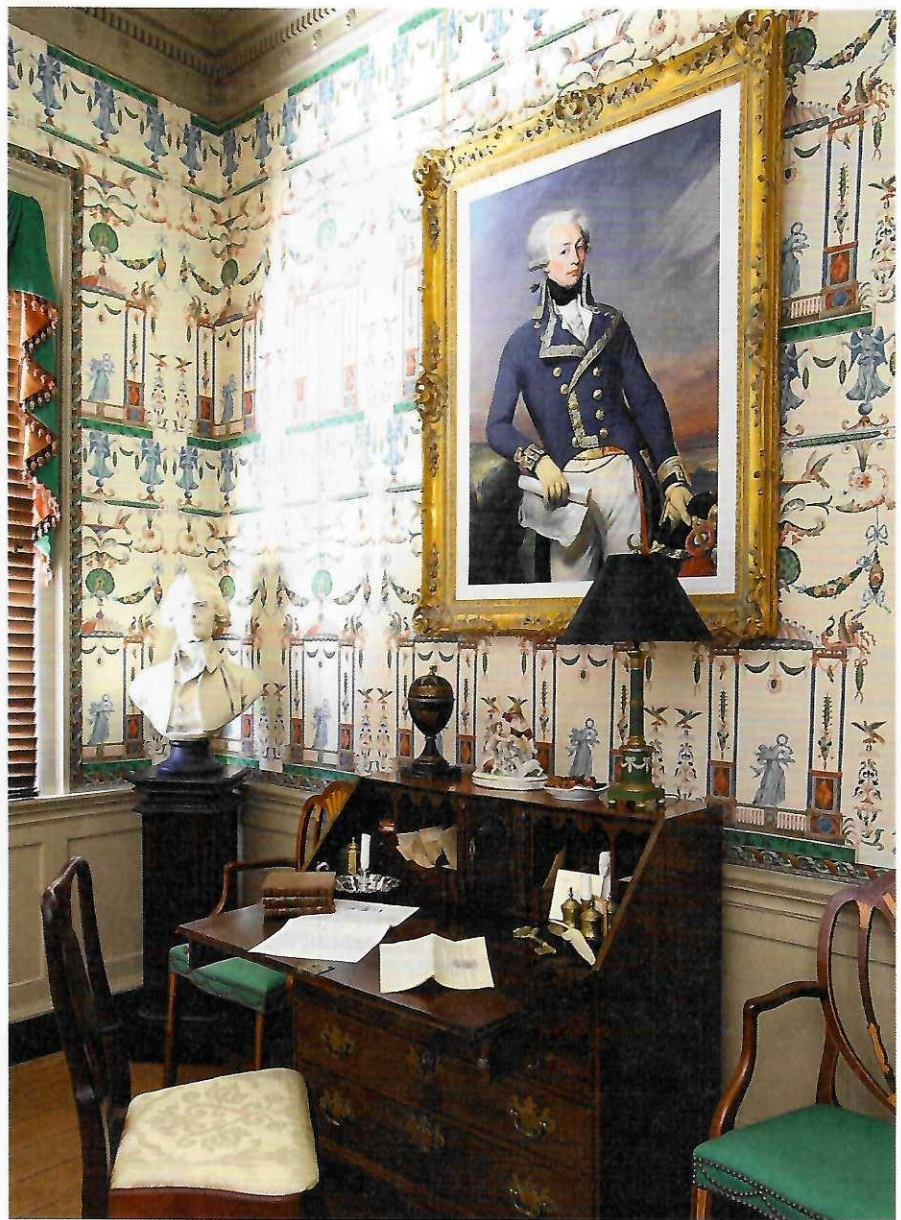
Joseph found this 18th-Century slant-top desk in Richmond. It holds an 18th-Century Meissen figurine, books published in 1774, and reproduction smalls. Hanging above is a reproduction painting of the Marquis de Lafayette. The chair of is one of two Queen Anne chairs he purchased at the "Turn" TV series auction. A reproduction Houdon bust of Thomas Jefferson stands in the corner.

enough to take it over in 1884."

Evidently jealousy ruled in the family, and the only way to keep peace was to split the house—each child got a third, divided into the wings and center pavilion. They treated the property as three houses, enlarging and renovating them independently. In essence, Strawberry Hill became three row houses with shared walls and would not be reunited until the owner of an adjacent warehouse bought all three in the 1970s.

By that time, Strawberry Hill was recognized as one of the oldest houses in Petersburg, and in 1974 ("On my birthday," noted Joseph) it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. The warehouse man wanted to tear it down to make room for parking but was willing to let Joseph peek inside, and Joseph was amazed at what he saw. Much of the original house was intact, from the mantels to the floorboards.

"I got on the phone and started calling people," said Joseph. "There was a newly formed architectural review board, and I knew some members and got them together with historians.

ABOVE LEFT The library walls are covered in grasscloth wallpaper painted black. The sofa and breakfront bookcase are reproductions. Atop the bookcase are reproduction figures of the Medici family by Michelangelo, with a portrait of King William hanging above. The wall tapestry is a copy of a 1685 Brussels original depicting a deer hunting scene, part of the Louvre collection. The full-size statue copies a French sculpture of the god Mercury tying his winged sandals. ABOVE RIGHT Above the library fireplace hangs a reproduction portrait of Princess Anne, later Queen Anne, the original painted by Sir Peter Lely. The gold-framed portrait on the right wall depicts an unknown man, the original painted by John Smibert of Boston, a Scottish-born painter and architect who established an early tradition of colonial portraiture in Boston. Joseph painted the replica of Rembrandt's son Titus, hanging over the doorway, when he was 17. The reproduction tea table displays an antique japanned tea caddy. The wing chairs are 1740s reproductions.

The fireplace mantel holds a copy of the clock King Louis XVI gave to Marie Antoinette. The busts on either side of the clock represent French philosophers Voltaire and Rousseau.

We got as many people as we could at a meeting and stopped the warehouse man from tearing it down."

At that point they had nine months to find an alternative for the parking needs of the warehouse before the house could be torn down. The house was boarded up, and behind that cover the owner began to strip the valuable parts of the interior. Of course, those interiors constituted the majority of the historic value of the house, and with them gone, nothing would stand in the way of tearing down the house.

The warehouse owner started negotiating with the University of Virginia, offering them the floor-boards of Strawberry Hill for the restoration of the Rotunda. "The architect of the project found out where the flooring was coming from, so the review board sued the owner for dismantling the house," said Joseph. "When the lawsuit came out, the main office told the warehouse man just to give them the house."

Petersburg got the house, but had no plans for it. "It just sat there for years and years," said Joseph.

He lived on the next block and watched it deteriorate through several fires. When it was advertised for sale, people saw the chain link fence around it, the bad neighborhood, and that it was divided into three units, and they inevitably backed away.

FAMILY RESTORERS

Joseph has a long history of restoring homes in Petersburg. "I've worked here on restoring buildings most of my life," he noted. Restoration is in his blood. "My uncle, James E. Caudle, restored Mayfield Cottage, a brick colonial in Dinwiddie County." On the National Register since 1969, Mayfield is regarded as the oldest brick structure in the county.

"When I was seventeen, I got involved with the Petersburg Historical Foundation," he noted. "The president was a friend of my uncle." She and her family restored several homes in the city.

Joseph's training was informal. "I

The drawing room retains many of its original architectural features—an elaborately carved mantel and overmantel, concave niches, an arched fanlight, and paneled wainscoting. The plaster work was replicated from a mold of the original. The wall colors were custom mixed. Joseph found reproduction inlaid tables with the same curvature as the niches. The mantel holds pieces of Meissen china beneath a 19th-Century painting of Twickenham, Horace Walpole's estate in London, which encompasses the Marble Hill House on which this house is based. The late-1700s embroidered fireplace shields came from the "Turn" auction (he had to bid for them separately). The 1790s New York-style sofas are covered in a silk stripe fabric and flanked by end tables displaying Meissen china. The center table and Regency-style chairs are reproductions. Federal-style inlaid card tables beneath Adam-style mirrors flank the doorway. Joseph bought the carpet from an estate sale to match the room's color scheme. INSET Joseph had the plaster ceiling medallion re-created from a mold of the original work. The reproduction chandelier copies a French Empire style.

learned from working with my dad," he said. "I just learned a lot. He was very talented, good at woodworking, although his thing was airplanes and flying. He was an artist as well and drew very well."

His mother and father instilled in him a love of history. "Williamsburg had a big influence on me growing up. My parents took me there when I was four, and I remember the peacocks and gardens," said Joseph. "Over the years, Mother would take us down there on Sunday afternoons just to look around."

Joseph is also an artist, a talent that shows in his meticulous restoration. In addition, he currently makes pen-and-ink renderings of historic homes and restores oil paintings. He had been a painter but no longer finds the time for it. In addition, he's an avid art collector, as any visit to his home instantly reveals.

Open the door and Joseph is gregarious and welcoming, the kind of person whom you meet for the first time and feel that you already know. A lot of that has to do with his job as an actor at Colonial Williamsburg, where he also teaches period dancing. His face may be familiar because he's featured in Williamsburg's current advertisements.

Joseph got started in home restoration in the 1980s when Petersburg was testing the waters for its own form of urban renewal. "They had slated fifty structures they wanted to demolish in the old town historic district," said Joseph. He knew the houses were in horrible condition, but with so many of them gone, the area would have lost its historic designation. He didn't want to see that happen.

Among the fifty, Joseph and his family found three 19th-Century workingman's cottages in a row. "They were Cape Cod-looking houses," he noted. His family bought all three from the historic foundation. They restored one and later sold it. The middle house proved to be beyond hope. The third was the

The tester bed in the master bedroom is a reproduction of one by 18th-Century Charleston cabinetmaker Thomas Elfe. The bench at its foot is a Chippendale reproduction. The 1940s chairs replicate antiques with Prince of Wales plumes on the backs. An early-1800s-style wallpaper border frames a Federal-style mirror above the fireplace. The mantel holds marble candlesticks and reproduction brass figures. A reproduction linen press stands to the left of the fireplace. Early 19th-Century black-and-white prints on the left wall depict Greek gods Bacchus and Aphrodite.

The bedroom walls are covered with reproduction historical wallpaper by Schumacher. The missing fireplace mantel had to be re-created. It displays Wedgwood china and an old figurine Joseph bought at auction. An etching of Marie Antoinette hangs above. The linen-covered Louis XIV-style bench and chair are imports. Joseph bought the Italian-made marble-top table from a friend—it once stood in the Plaza Hotel in New York City. The Chinese Chippendale mirror is hand-carved.

childhood home of Edward H. Titmus, the founder of Titmus Optical Company, which grew to be one of the largest lens makers in the world (before being sold to Carl Zeiss in 1974) and at one time employed more than 1,200 people in Petersburg.

"His grandson was concerned with preserving the cottage where his grandfather was born, and he funded the restoration of the house, which we did for them," said Joseph. "When we finished, he donated the house."

Joseph turned the middle plot where the second house had been into the Titmus Memorial Garden.

THREE-TO-ONE

By 1984, Joseph thought he was up to the challenge of restoring Strawberry Hill. He bought the properties from the foundation and began returning them to the 1800 configuration. He started by removing all the accumulations of age—one addition was nearly as large as a house.

Although the homes had been updated with modern necessities such as plumbing and electricity, the three sections of the house had been renovated separately by different owners and contractors. Joseph was faced with combining them again with a common, up-to-date and up-to-code electrical system, plumbing, and HVAC—all without compromising the original interior. Except for

A reproduction statue of the goddess Diana stands in the garden off to the left side facing the house. Azaleas and rhododendron are just beginning to bloom against a backdrop of boxwood hedges.

Joseph Miller has been working on restorations in his native Petersburg for most of his life.

electric lights and outlets, there's little visual evidence of the updates. For example, the modern outlets are all in the baseboards, where they blend in, matching the original black or brown.

He also scoured the county and country for the architectural elements that had been sold off. He was able to find the originals for all but one of the mantels in an upstairs bedroom. He knew what the original had looked like, and he had an exact replacement made.

One of his successes in restoring original elements was the set of mahogany dining room doors. "The people who owned the middle section of the house moved to another section of Petersburg and took the doors with them," Joseph noted. "They put an ad in the paper that they were for sale." They still have their original latches and silver-plated lock plate.

When decorating, Joseph matched colors to the originals he found during the restoration. "Because the house sat vacant for so many years, the many coats of paint had blistered off really badly.

The majority of the house had to be stripped and repainted, but in the places it wasn't bad I left the paint for the historical record."

He had less luck with the furnishings—none are original to the house. He had tracked down only one piece that can be definitely associated with Strawberry Hill, a linen press-desk combination that once belonged to William Haxall. It resides beyond reach (and not on display) in a Williamsburg museum.

With the major work at Strawberry Hill finished—there's always something left to attend to—Joseph is working on another Petersburg restoration, a Victorian house down the street that he plans to rent out. He's working with Historical Petersburg Foundation and others to preserve the many historic homes in the city.

"You'd be surprised how many historic houses are vacant," he noted. He hopes Strawberry Hill will inspire others to restore them. ★

Winfield Ross is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.